



Focus on Washington's Water Quality Assessment

from Ecology's Water Quality Program

Overview of the 2002/2004 Assessment

The Department of Ecology is seeking comment on its preliminary assessment of water quality for Washington's waters, including the Section 303(d) list of polluted waters. This focus sheet provides an overview of the assessment process.

Why is it important to assess the quality of Washington's waters?

One of the primary tasks of the Department of Ecology's Water Quality Program is to identify and clean up polluted waters. Washington's citizens help with this important work in many ways—by observing and measuring conditions in local streams, by participating on local groups that develop and implement water cleanup plans, and by changing their daily activities to produce less pollution.

How are we cleaning up polluted waters?

The federal Clean Water Act, adopted in 1972, requires that all states restore their waters to be "fishable and swimmable." To achieve this goal, Washington has established water quality standards designed to protect the beneficial uses of our lakes, rivers and streams. These beneficial uses include drinking water, recreation, and habitat for fish and other aquatic life. The water quality standards address toxic chemicals, such as arsenic, and conventional pollutants, such as bacteria. They also set limits on other conditions, such as the maximum temperature for a water body, because water that is too warm harms fish and other aquatic life.

The Clean Water Act established a process to identify and clean up polluted waters. Every two years, all states are required to prepare a list of water bodies that do not meet water quality standards. This list is called the 303(d) list because the process is described in Section 303(d) of the Clean Water Act.

To develop the list, Ecology compiles its own water quality data and invites other groups to submit water quality data they have collected. All data submitted need to be collected using appropriate scientific methods. Once the list is put together, the public has a chance to review it and give comments. The final list is formally submitted to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which has the authority to approve or disapprove it. A water cleanup plan, also known as a "total maximum daily load" or TMDL, must be developed for each of the water bodies on the 303(d) list. The cleanup plan identifies how much pollution needs to be reduced or eliminated to achieve clean water.



Why is Ecology changing the list of polluted waters?

Washington has produced several 303(d) lists, and those lists did a good job of describing the state's polluted waters. However, the story they told was not complete. A water body was either listed as polluted or it was not listed at all. This year, the state will produce a list that will tell a more complete story about the condition of Washington's waters. The new list will divide water bodies into one of five categories:

Category 1 - Meets tested standards for clean waters. Placement in this category does not necessarily mean that a water body is free of all pollutants. Most water quality monitoring is designed to detect a specific array of pollutants, so placement in this category means that the water body met standards for all the pollutants for which it was tested.

Category 2 - Waters of concern includes waters where there is some evidence of a water quality problem for a given pollutant, but not enough to require production of a cleanup plan, or TMDL, at this time. There are several reasons why a water body would be placed in this category. A water body might have pollution levels that are not quite high enough to violate the water quality standards, or there may not be enough violations to categorize it as "impaired" according to Ecology's listing policy. There might be data showing water quality violations, but the data were not collected using proper scientific methods. In all of these situations, these are waters that we will want to continue to test.

Category 3 - No data is a category that will be largely empty. Water bodies that have not been tested nor had no information submitted will not be individually listed, but if they do not appear in one of the other categories, they are assumed to belong in this category.

Category 4 - Polluted waters that do not require a TMDL includes waters that have pollution problems that are being solved in one of three ways:

- 4a. "Has a TMDL"** is for water bodies that have an approved cleanup plan in place that is actively being implemented.
- 4b. "Has a pollution control plan"** is for water bodies that have a plan in place that is expected to solve the pollution problems. While pollution control plans are not TMDLs, they must have many of the same features and there must be some legal or financial guarantee that they will be implemented.
- 4c. "Impaired by a non-pollutant"** is for water bodies impaired by causes that cannot be addressed through a clean-up plan. These impairments include low water flow, stream channelization, and physical barriers to fish migration such as dams and culverts. These problems require complex solutions to help restore streams to more natural conditions.

Category 5 - Polluted waters that require a TMDL or "the 303(d) list," is the traditional list of impaired water bodies. Placement in this category means that Ecology has data showing that the water quality standards have been violated for one or more pollutants, and there is no TMDL or pollution control plan. TMDLs are required for the water bodies in this category.

Why is a stream sometimes listed in more than one category?

A single water body segment may be listed multiple times, depending on how many tested pollutants violated the water quality standards. For example, a water body might be listed in Category 5 because temperatures consistently violated standards; in Category 2 because some high bacteria counts were found, but not enough to list it as impaired; and in Category 1 because dissolved oxygen levels were good. Each listing will also include the medium in which the pollutant was measured—water, sediment, or fish tissue.

Why is the water quality assessment so important?

In part, because the list helps us focus our limited time on water bodies that need the most work. We will be able to use state resources more efficiently.

More importantly, the list of water bodies in the assessment reflects local government, community and citizen recognition of water quality problems in Washington. This is another indicator of citizen interest in, and commitment to, clean water. Local involvement in identifying, and then solving water quality problems is critical. When citizens are involved in the process of assessing water quality, they will want to be involved in actions to improve water quality.

How do I learn more?

To learn more about the preliminary assessment of Washington's waters, contact Ken Koch at (360) 407-6782 or visit our web site at www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wq/links/impaired_wtrs.html